



City of Austin

**Gregorio "Greg" Casar, Council Member
District 4**

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QUESTIONS FOR INTERIM CHIEF JOSEPH CHACON

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I have outlined a list of topics and questions for Interim Chief Chacon that I believe reflects many community priorities regarding public safety and criminal justice.

Crime and Reform

We must protect and improve public safety. We need to be more effective and efficient with our officer time and resources while addressing public safety, criminal activity, and criminal justice reform.

What are your top accomplishments in addressing criminal activity since you have been Interim Chief? What do you see as the major drivers of crime and violence, and how will you address these?

What are your top accomplishments in police reform since you have been Interim? What are your top goals in this area if made permanent Chief?

Victim Services

The City Council passed multiple directives to elevate and enhance Victim Services. We need our local criminal justice system to truly serve survivors of violence. Specifically, our budget directed that we examine whether Victim Services become its own department (if recommended by advocates and the administration) or that it be elevated to have a direct connection to the Chief of Police. My understanding is that the ultimate preference is to elevate Victim Services rather than separate it.

Has the Council direction for Victim Services been completed? If not, why? What next steps and what timeline do we have to complete the directions?

Sexual Assault

APD's handling of sexual assault cases has received a lot of criticism from survivors, community members, and from my colleagues and me.

What is your assessment about how APD has handled sexual assault in the past?

Beginning in 2018, multiple survivors of sexual assault have sued the City, the County, & APD.

What is your assessment of how APD is handling sexual assault cases now? What measurable and meaningful improvements to sexual assault cases can you commit to making? What are our commitments on processing of sexual assault evidence kits? What issues raised by the lawsuit are you committed to addressing?

You committed to rejoining the Sexual Assault Response Teams when you were appointed as Interim Chief, and I appreciate you fulfilling that commitment. Some members of the team continue to express concerns that our engagement is lacking or insufficient.

Have you heard these concerns, and what changes can we make to address them?

Staffing

You have indicated that you are not supportive of a ratio of two police officers per thousand because it is not evidence-based policing. The question remains in the community about how to determine appropriate staffing levels while balancing the needs of all city services.

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Will you work with the community as a whole and with other City departments to have a conversation about what staffing levels should be? Can we jointly commit to having open conversations and an open mind, and not coming to any conclusions until we have had these conversations?

We have many sworn vacancies to fill through the academy, which I know you have worked diligently on as Interim Chief. We also have many civilian vacancies at the 911 call center. Some employees point to the low pay, as low as \$36,500 a year, as a core problem. We have allocated funding for dozens of new staff, but vacancies remain at 911.

What is your plan to address the 911 staffing issue?

Collaboration with prosecutors

I understand that the District Attorney's office has created a homicide and major crimes unit. During the Police Chief selection process, sources at the City have indicated that our collaboration here is lacking.

What steps has APD taken to ensure that homicide detectives are engaged in early communication with the District Attorney's office on homicides and major crime cases?

We have received letters from the District Attorney and County Attorney alleging that officers have declined to investigate criminal activity and have blamed prosecutors in the process. There have been repeated instances where true information is not conveyed by the department, which is to the detriment of democracy, community relations, and public safety.

How quickly did you respond to the County Attorney and District Attorney letters? What steps did you take when you received the letters? What are your next steps? How are we addressing the broader issue?

Internal Affairs

The Council has previously directed Internal Affairs investigations (non-criminal internal investigations) to be conducted by civilians, or a combination of police and civilians. This shift would allow for more objectivity in investigations and would free up officers at APD. Although officers in divisions such as Internal Affairs are usually not patrol officers, sergeants freed up from Internal Affairs could fill in gaps that are being opened by more senior retiring officers and help address both staffing and reform.

If funded and directed by Council, will you move qualified civilians to assist with internal affairs? How could you implement this approach in a way that addresses staffing issues at APD?

Use of force, police tactics, and racial disparities revisions

You committed when you accepted the Interim Chief position to revise the general orders with the consensus of the Community Police Review Commission to address issues identified during last year's protests. That means addressing chokeholds, no-knocks, use of force, etc., for community and officer safety.

Have you reached consensus on the general order amendments? If not, why not, and what is the timeline to reaching consensus and implementing changes?



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We saw many demonstrators get injured by disproportionate and dangerous responses during last year's protests.

Why were demonstrators (specifically, people who were not engaging in any harmful activity) injured at the Summer 2020 protests? Do you believe we engaged appropriately as a department? What have we learned? I believe that our strategy was dangerous for those demonstrating peacefully as well as for officers assigned to be a human shield.

Recent data have shown significant racial disparities in traffic stops. This cannot be solely attributed to heavier patrol presence in communities of color where there is higher 911 call volume, because the racial disparities in traffic stops also exist in high-income, very low violent crime areas of the city.

What are your thoughts on racial disparities and traffic stops, and what should we change as it relates to traffic enforcement to address this?

How are we addressing issues of race and policing, generally?

Real solutions to 911 calls

There are persistent public safety and quality of life issues in our community that need a solution. I believe that police are often sent to be the first responders to problems that the department is ill equipped to handle. This is often not the fault of the department, but a fault in our overall system of local government. I believe our community needs a Chief of Police who is willing to acknowledge this and genuinely work with everyone on such complex challenges.

Some of the clearest examples involve addiction and mental health. Often, there are dozens of 911 calls made to the exact same location or same house over and over again because a person living there has problems with their mental health or addiction. The drain on police resources is significant. Sometimes the problem never gets solved no matter how many times officers go out. Neighbors want solutions, but we do not have the substance use programs or the mental health staff to deal with much of it, so we send police because it is what we have.

How many 911 calls can we address, and how many staffing hours can we save you, if we begin to implement solutions like this? Will you engage directly in examples like this to help us fund city services that will fix the issues that officers cannot easily fix?

Can we lean on your decades of experience in our department to help us find ways to implement solutions that work? Can we find a way to make this process less contentious, and in a way that provides a better path for police and the community?

Internal candidate issue

Community members have raised concerns with an internal candidate because state law provides that police chiefs, hired internally, cannot be terminated in the same way as external candidates.

If the City Manager asks you to retire/resign or the Council passes a vote of no-confidence, will you invoke this provision of state law or will you retire/resign?